SOUTH & EAST

JOHN MASEFIELD

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Soon they will blast me ' ; but he watcht intent . . .
Starlight and dawn a little colour lent ; "

SOUTH AND EAST

By

JOHN MASEFIELD

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When good King Arthur ruled these western hursts,
That farmhouse held a farmer with three sons,
Gai, Kai and Kradoc, so the story runs.
All of the hollow where the water bursts
They reckoned holy land.
For there, they said, the gods came, hand in hand,
At midnight, in full moon, to quench their thirsts.

So by the hollow's western edge they fenc't
With unhewn stone and hawthorn and wild rose,
A little meadow as a holy close
Not to be trodden in by foot uncleanst . . .
And from the harvests rare
Which filled their granaries, they were aware
That the great gods this service recompenst.

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Gai was a hunter through the country-side;
Kai was a braggart little prone to truth;
Kradoc was reckoned but a simple youth,
Though kind and good and all his mother's pride.
He loved his mother well;
He loved his mare and dog; but it befell
That sorrow smote him young, for all three died.

Now it befell in grass-time, late in May,
That Gai, the hunter, going out at dawn,
Found the grass trampled in that sacred lawn,
All trodden as by feet the flowers lay.
He thought, "Some godless men
Have done this evil; lest they come agen
I'll watch to-night beside the holy hay."

Yet in his watch he slept, and when the east
Grew bright with primrose-coloured morning, lo,
The grass again was laid past power to mow;
By godless men, it seemed, not any beast.
So, when the next night fell,
Kai came to watch, but slept, not waking well;
At dawn the trodden portion had increast.

" Gai was a hunter through the country-side ;
Kai was a braggart little prone to truth ;
Kradoc was reckoned but a simple youth,"

Then, on the third night, Kradoc said, "Let me
Be guard to-night"; so, when the dusk was dim,
He took his hunting-spear and stationed him
Beside the close beneath a hawthorn-tree.
The thin moon westered out,
The midnight covered all things with her doubt,
The summer made the world one mystery.

Then, when the hunting owls had ceast to cry,
There came a sound like birds upon the wing,
And shapes within the close were glimmering,
Hushing, and putting glittering raiment by . . .
Then the shapes moved; they seemed
Three women, dancing, but their moving gleamed:
Or were they birds? because they seemed to fly.

"They are the goddesses," he thought, "at
game . . .
Soon they will blast me"; but he watcht
intent . . .
Starlight and dawn a little colour lent;
They were three women, each like moving flame
In some old dance of glee,
All lovely, but the leader of the three
Beauty so great as hers can have no name.

For hours he stared, not moving, while they
danced;
Then in the brightening dusk a blackbird cried;
The dancing stopped, the women slipped aside,
There to the grey wall where their plumage
glanced,
They donned it and were gone
Up, upon wings; across the sky they shone,
Gleams on the darkness where the dawn advanced.

And being vanisht, all his heart was sore
With love of that fair Queen. "Alas, I kept
Ill watch," he said, "and all the grass is stepped,
As though it had been danct on o'er and o'er.
To-night I'll try again,
A second night I will not watch in vain."
All day at work love searcht him to the core.

At night, his father and his brothers both
Came with him to the holy close to guard;
But long before the midnight many-starred,
His comrades slept, forgetting boast and oath.
The hours went by: he heard
The darkness laughing with the marvellous bird
Who husht the woodland with her plighting troth.

Then, suddenly, with linnet cryings sweet,
The shapes were near him, putting off their
wings;
Then all the close was swift with glimmerings
Of silvery figures upon flying feet
White as the thorn that blows,
Skimming the daisies as the swallow goes
Or as the sunlight ripples upon wheat.

Then, as he stared and prayed, the thought came
bold.
" There are their wings upon the wall, put by . . .
If I could take them, then they could not fly . . .
But these are gods, immortal from of old,
And they would blast me dead
If I should touch their plumage silver-spread,
Let alone gather it and try to hold."

But as the moth about the candle tries
To know the beauty of the inmost fire,
And feels no burning but his heart's desire,
And even by scorching cannot be made wise,
He took the wings: a lark
Twittered, and colour stood out from the dark;
Those figures sought their wings with passionate
cries.

" They are not goddesses," he thought; and then
Seeing who held their wings, those lovely birds
Were pleading with him with caressing words:
" Friend, we shall die if we are seen by men.
Give us our wings, oh, give;
We may not look upon the sun and live:
Sweet mortal, let us have our plumes agen."

Then, to the first, he gave the plumes, from fear;
Then, to the second, gave them out of grace;
Then she, the Queen, was with him, face to face,
Within the touch of hand, she was so near
The two spread wings and sailed
Up to the summer heaven primrose-paled.
" O lovely Queen," he cried, " for pity, hear.

These two nights now I have beheld your dance,
And nothing matters now, but only you;
You are so beautiful, it shakes me through,
The thought of you is my inheritance.
I am unfit to speak
To such as you, but, lovely Queen, I seek
Only to love you, leaving life to chance.

I am unfit to touch your wings; but quake
At thought of losing you; for pity, tell
How I may reach the Kingdom where you dwell,
There to be slave or servant for your sake;
O bird of beauty bright,
Teach me the way, or come again to-night
And have some pity or my heart will break."

Then looking on the lovely lad's distress,
She loved his love for her and pitied him;
But now the morning made the stars all dim;
She took the wings from his unhappiness.
She said, " We have been seen,
We cannot dance again upon this green,
And where I dwell is past the wilderness."

" O tell me where," he cried, " for I shall find
The way there." " Ah," she answered, " Way is
none.
We dwell South of the Earth, East of the Sun,
Beyond the savage rocks and seas unkind;
You have no wings for flight,
No earthly mortal knows the course aright,
Unless the Three Queens have it still in mind."

"And where are they?" he asked. "Far, far,"
she said,
"Somewhere beyond the sunset in the West;
In seeking me you choose a weary quest.
Now, friend, farewell." "One minute more," he
prayed:
"Beloved, I shall try . . .
For I shall love you only till I die . . .
And seeking you, I shall not be afraid."

Her glowing face was noble with sweet thought.
"O friend," she said, "the love of me will bring
Loneliness, toil and many a bitter thing;
Nor can the friend you strive to help in aught.
But I will wait you there . . .
Come, even with palsied limbs and snowy hair,
All things are truly found if truly sought."

Then, leaning suddenly, she kisst his lips,
And pressed one glittering feather in his hand,
And swept away above the wakening land
As the white owl at dusk from cover slips . . .
Up the dark wood her gleam
Shone, as adown a basalt shines a stream;
Then she was gone and joy was in eclipse.

"He trod the forest where the were-wolves are
And spied a hut, as of some witch or gnome.
There sat an old crone wrinkled nose to chin."

At first, he hoped that she would come again :
He watched the next night through : no dancers
shone ;
Then the next night, until the stars were gone ;
Then the third night, but vigil was in vain.
" She cannot come," he cried,
" I will go seek her Kingdom far and wide ;
Better to die in search than live in pain."

So at the downland market he enquired
Of all the tinkers, if they knew the way
South of the Earth ? " There's no such land," said
they ;
" We have gone roving Earth till we are tired
And never heard the name."
The wandering merchants told the lad the same :
They knew all lands, but not the one desired.

And in the inn, a travelling minstrel told
Of lands beyond the sea, both East and West,
Lands where the phoenix has her burning nest,
And trees have emerald leaves and fruits of gold,
But no land East the Sun . . .
" Boy, I have been," he said, " There is not one."
" None," Kradoc thought, " There must be, to
the bold."

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He bade farewell to father, brothers, home,
Friends, and the grasses that her feet had prest;
He sailed to find the Three Queens in the West,
O'er many a billow with a toppling comb,
Till, 'neath the western star,
He trod the forest where the were-wolves are
And spied a hut, as of some witch or gnome.

There sat an old crone wrinkled nose to chin.
"Lady," he said, "Since I have gone astray,
Seeking the queens to tell me of my way,
Have you some shed that I can rest me in?
In recompense, I'll cut
Your winter's firing and repair your hut."
"O wonderful," she said, "New times begin.

I have reigned here for twenty oak-tree lives,
Yet never once has stranger spoken thus,
Bowing, uncovered, thoughtful, courteous:
What marvellous young noble here arrives?
One who goes South the Earth?
I govern all four-footed beasts from birth,
To-morrow I will ask them and their wives,

If any know the way to that far land.
Rest here to-night." And when the morrow came
All the four-footed creatures, wild and tame,
Ran thither at the lifting of her hand:
Slink tigers yellow-eyed,
The horse, the stag, the rabbit and his bride,
Fur, antlers, horns, as many as the sand.

They listened while she questioned of the way:
" South of the Earth ? " they answered, " Madam,
no . . .
It is a country where we never go . . .
There is not such a land, the bisons say.
Ask of the birds who fly;
The eagle may have seen it from the sky,
If not the eagle, then the seagull may."

" So," the Queen said, " My people cannot tell.
You must away to ask my Sister Queen
To ask her subject birds if they have seen
A country South the Earth where people dwell.
A year hence, travelling hard,
You may be with her, if no ills retard.
Good luck attend. Commend me to her well."

After a twelvemonths' tramp he reacht a lake
Wide-shimmering, beyond a waste of reeds;
There by a hovel mouldered green with weeds,
An old hag mumbled, gap-tootht as a rake.
"Lady," he pled, "I pray
You grant me shelter, I have lost my way;
All such requital as I can I'll make.

I will re-thatch your house and cut your corn,
And gather in your apples from the tree."
"O wonderful; new times begin," said she.
"I have lived here since roses had a thorn,
Yet never once till now
Has courteous youth addressed me with a bow.
And you go East the Sun and are forlorn?

I govern all the birds that know the air;
Rest here to-night; to-morrow I will ask
If any of them all can help your task
Or know the ways by which men journey there."
When morning came, she cried
"Come hither, birds," and from the heavens wide
Came erne and geier, heron, finch and stare,

" After a twelvemonths' tramp he reacht a lake
Wide-shimmering, beyond a waste of reeds ; "

Jay, robin, blackbird, sparrow, croaking crow,
Hawks from the height their talons brown with
blood,
Gannets that snatch the herring from the flood,
And fiery birds that glitter as they go.
" East of the Sun ? " they said. . . .
" We have flown windy space since wings were
made . . .
There's no such land. Perhaps the fish may know."

" So," the Queen said, " My subjects cannot guide.
You must go ask my Sister Queen, who rules
The dwellers in the rivers and the pools
And the green seas that waver yet abide.
A year's hard travelling hence
Should bring you there : her Kingdom is immense,
Her folk know every country washt by tide."

* * * * *

After another year he trod the beach
Beside an ocean breaking wave by wave.
There an old hag peered from a dripping cave,
" O ocean Queen," he cried, " grant, I beseech,
That I may rest till day.
To-morrow I will labour to repay
Your kindness to me as your wish shall teach."

"O wonderful; new times begin," she said.
"I have lived here since raindrops became sea;
Yet none till now has spoken thus to me,
Courteous and kind and modest as a maid.
South of the Earth you go?
Rest for to-night; to-morrow you shall know
If those I govern know it and can aid."

When morning came, the Queen gave her command,
And straight the bay was white with many a streak
From the swift fins of those that cannot speak:
Whales, dolphins, salmon, hurrying to the land;
Herrings, the pickerels fierce,
Mackerel with blue flanks writ with magic verse,
And cuttles such as eye has never scanned.

The thought passed to and fro, without a word.
"Ah," the Queen said, "They cannot help you, friend.
Between the world's edge and the ocean's end
No fish, no four-foot beast, no flying bird
Has heard of any place
South of the Earth: you say the human race
Knows no such land. Your seeking is absurd.

Why not abandon what is surely vain?
Why not return to all you left at home,
To shear the shining furrow down the loam
Feeling the plough-team lean against the rein?
To marry; and be skilled
In all good crafts, and have your granaries filled
And live till Death comes gently without pain?

Were these not better than the life you choose,
Seeking the thing that is not?" "No," said he;
"This feather, that still shines, she gave to me;
I will go on, though every footstep bruise."
Out in the bay a stir
Broke the land's quiet image into blur . . .
"Wait yet," the Queen said, "something comes
with news.

Yes, news of South the Earth . . . the fish that
flies,
The thing that beasts and birds and fish disown;
He has a rumour of it, he alone . . .
Go with him therefore, if you think it wise.
These silver wings and fins
Will help you thither; and Desire wins
Though the Desired, won, may prove no prize."

Then with that silvery skimmer of the seas
He sped across the unquiet fatal field,
Now pastured on by haze, now ridged and steeled,
Now low, now loud, but never at its ease;
Till a last leaping flight
Bore him ashore through billows crashing white
Beneath a cliff of granite topped by trees.

And at the scree-top, lo, the crag was sheer,
Hard granite face, nine hundred feet and more,
Gleaming where drifts of cataracts came o'er
And trackless to the foot of mountaineer.
He traced along beneath,
Among the boulders and the stunted heath,
And ever and anon he seemed to hear

From somewhere up above, the cry and bay
Of dogs and hounds together giving tongue,
So that his spirit was with terror wrung
Lest these should be the hunting dogs who slay
Like wolves, what men they meet;
He was defenceless and without retreat,
But thought "Since hounds are there, there is a
way

" After another year he trod the beach
Beside an ocean breaking wave by wave.
There an old hag peered from a dripping cave,"

Up to the summit; and perhaps the hounds
Have huntsmen with them who would succour me."
So thrice he hailed, all unavailingly.
Then o'er the tumbled rocks with leaps and bounds
A dog came swiftly to him,
Barking and wagging tail as though he knew him.
It was his dog, long dead to smells and sounds,

Long buried in that distant Berkshire place,
Now here alive, and crying, "Master, come,
This is our ever-living happy home . . .
Come with me up the track the rabbits trace;
This way, and have no fear.
Climb with me to the forest, Master dear.
We live there always in delightful chase.

All day we hunt whatever game we choose,
Then, in the dusk, we pull it down and eat;
But by the dawn it runs again on feet,
Alive and scattering scent across the dews . . .
Now, up the rock top; lo,
The forest, green as Berkshire long ago.
There run the hounds at game they cannot lose."

And, as he spoke, the precipice was scaled.
There lay a marvellous land of oak-trees high,
With grass where hounds were running in full cry
After immortal game that never failed.
All dogs of every kind
Routed or hunted as they had the mind,
And all were glad, for all were waggy-tailed.

" Come with me, Master, through the forest green,"
The little dog said, " as we went of old
Along the Icknield underneath the wold.
Here we forget, in time, what we have been ;
But I remember well
The rabbits and the moles and the rich smell
Of those old warrens in that happy scene,

And mind your kindness to me." Then they went
For three long days across the forest land,
Until they reacht a desert, white with sand.
" Stay here," the dog said. " Someone will be sent
To guide you further on."
He licked his hand and bounded and was gone.
The desert stretcht its desolate extent.

Its saltness nourisht naught but poisonous things,
The moon in silence looked upon its waste,
Then, towards dawn, a something came in haste
Trotting the sand or skimming it on wings:
It was his long-dead mare,
Coming with whinnyings to greet him there,
Dreading no adder's bite nor scorpion stings.

"Master," she said, "I come out of my rest
To bear you hence upon my wings of flame,
For I can fly now, nothing makes me lame . . .
Mount me and lay both hands upon my crest.
O I remember well,
Deep in my spirit, all the Berkshire fell
And you and I at gallop, heading west.

Now for a time I rest me from the past,
But those old days recur; the huntsman's horn,
The opening of the bin-lid for the corn,
The sweet red apples tumbling to the blast.
You with the bit, which I
Dodged, till the oat-sieve shook too temptingly . . .
And all your kindness to me to the last.

Now mount and ride, together we will go
A swifter gallop than we ever knew."
Then, when he mounted, instantly she flew
Over the desert white with salt like snow;
Skimming the sudden whip
Of the blunt adder with the swollen lip;
Making the sage flow back as waters flow.

Till after three long days she made a halt
Upon the beaches of a sea whose waves
Moaned like to cattle in the glittering caves
And fed the tremulous jellies with their salt.
"O Master mine, farewell,"
The mare said, "Now I gallop back to dwell
In far green pastures without any fault.

For there we dwell together in the plain
Unbitted and unshod, in knee-deep grass,
Where never any gad nor botfly was,
But scarlet apples fall and golden grain.
And there we whinny and race
With streaming tails in the delight of pace,
And muse about old harness with disdain."

So with a whinny as of old she sped,
Out of his sight across the desert sand,
Leaving him lonely on the ocean-strand
Where the spent tide its gathered seaweed
spread:
Then, gliding over sea,
A woman came to him; no wings had she,
She moved by love, being his Mother dead.

"O lovely son," she said, "who have given all
For love, despite the hardness of the way,
I come to give such guidance as I may,
And be beside your going, lest you fall.
O often I have been
Close, as you travelled hither, though unseen,
And speaking, though you could not hear my call.

I live in the sweet world that love creates.
It is more beautiful than I can tell,
For we can go with water into hell,
With peace to pain, with gentleness to hates.
We have this joy, to strive
To help the grief of everything alive
And show where Heaven shines at open gates.

And some, if truly called by mortal need,
Can come, with light and courage and swift
strength,
To vanquish the dull snake whose deadly length
Laps and would coil, round every human deed.
Give me your hand, my son,
The darkness shows that morning has begun,
And we have far to travel: let us speed."

She took his hand, and, lo, they footed sure,
Unsunk upon the unsupporting sea;
They trod the air, unfallen, flying free,
High in the cloudless currents, mountain-pure,
Until a land arose,
Peak upon peak, with pinnacles of snows,
East of the Sun, where happy dreams endure.

His mother kissed his brow and then was gone;
He was alone upon the shore, his sight
Dazzled at first by plenitude of light,
For all things in that happy country shone.
A loitering cataract leapt . . .
A glittering people, crying "Welcome," swept
On wings above him, flying on and on.

"Within the green grove dim
Someone was singing at a morning hymn."

"This is the land," he cried. "But where is she?
Where shall I find the wonder whom I love?"
Before him ran a brook out of a grove,
Bringing clear water to the clearer sea.
Within the green grove dim
Someone was singing at a morning hymn:
"O you," he cried, "Beloved, answer me."

He thrust aside the myrtle and the rose:
There was his lover stitching, plume by plume,
Bright silver wings that glittered in the gloom,
And singing out her ballad to the close . . .
Seeing him there, she stood;
She shone as though the light were in her blood;
Gone was the waiting time with all its woes.

"I never ceased to trust," she said, "And lo,
The wings which I have wrought for you are made,
Save for one silver feather which I laid
Bright in your hand, beloved, long ago.
You have it still, I see.
We win the lovers' heaven, happy we,
The greatest happiness that heart can know."

Then placing on his shoulders the bright pair
Of wings, she took her lover by the hand
And with him swept above that sunny land,
Thrusting aside, like swans, the rushing air,
To some green place of peace
Where love like theirs forever knows increase,
For nothing sad can ever trouble there.

But sometimes, ere the cuckoos lose their tune,
Ere pink has tinged the snowdrifts of the may
Or seething scythe has gleamed into the hay,
Or nightingales stopped singing to the moon
Whose whiteness climbs and rounds;
Then, in the peace which silences earth's sounds
Save the bird's triumph and the water's croon,

Then, sometimes, in the hush, a glimmering glows
Into a brightness in that Berkshire grass.
Those lovers come where their first meeting was
Beside the spring, within the holy close.
They dance there through the night,
Treading adown in patterns of delight
Moon-daisy, vetch, and fallen hawthorn blows.

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